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ABSTRACT

This publication presents the American Federation of Teachers' 10 criteria for high-quality public school academic standards and seeks to contribute to the national debate about school reform, academic achievement, and world-class educational standards. The criteria are: (1) standards must focus on academics because the purpose of setting standards is to improve students' academic performances, which should be the central mission of all educational arrangements; (2) standards must be grounded in the core disciplines to ensure that interdisciplinary approaches reflect the depth and integrity of the disciplines involved and that standards can be clearly designed and communicated; (3) standards must be specific enough to assure the development of a common core curriculum guaranteeing that all students are exposed to a common core of learning; (4) standards most be manageable given the constraints of time; (5) standards must be rigorous and world class; (6) standards must include "performance standards" that indicate how competent a student demonstration must be to indicate attainment of the content standard; (7) standards must include multiple performance levels allowing multiple standards that set expectations to match different aspirations and achievements; (8) standards must combine knowledge and skills, not pursue one at the expense of the other; (9) standards must not dictate how the material should be taught; and (10) standards must be written clearly enough for all stakeholders to understand. (JB)

Setting Strong Standards

AFT's criteria for judging the quality and usefulness of student achievement standards

nerican Federation of Teachers

AFT Criteria for High-Quality Standards

Imagine it is 10 years from now. Instead of endless news stories decrying the low quality of American schools, instead of constant proposals for private school vouchers and other forms of privatization, and instead of school bond votes sinking because voters feel they are pouring good money after bad, America's public schools have turned themselves around.

Teachers, parents, taxpayers—and the students themselves—all know what we expect our children to know and be able to do, because states have adopted and publicized clearly defined academic standards and translated them into curriculum frameworks that guide instruction. What our students study is no longer delegated to a handful of textbook publishers. The expectations for students are high—as demanding as the standards met by students in other industrialized countries. And the belief that all students can do challenging work has put an end to the watered-down curricula that so many kids—especially those in the inner city—used to receive.

Students are periodically tested on whether they're reaching the standards, and if they're not, the system responds with appropriate assistance and intervention. Until students meet the standards, they won't be able to graduate from high school or to enter college; and they won't have an easy out—even McDonald's won't hire them until they meet some version of the standards. Since learning now "counts," parents no longer complain about too much homework or teachers who are too strict. Instead, they support teachers' efforts to elicit hard work from their children. The relationship between teachers and their students has improved, too; it has become similar to that of a coach to his team. Students know that much depends on their success in reaching clearly defined goals, and they see teachers as their allies in that joint effort.

Teachers' roles are further strengthened because all components of the school system are devoted to helping students achieve the standards and, therefore, are all working together: The curriculum that teachers use is based on these standards and so are the assessments (instruction is no longer distorted by the drive to produce high scores on multiple-choice, basic-skills tests); teacher education and professional development programs are focused on preparing teachers to help students meet the standards (instead of one-shot workshops on generic teaching skills or the latest fads); and textbooks and other instructional materials are tailored to the content of the curriculum frameworks.

Finally, the federal government, the state education agency, and school district have greatly loosened the rules and regulations that have smothered innovation in the past. With standards and assessments to measure their success, schools and teachers are free to find and devise the best programs and strategies for helping students succeed.

This may sound like a fantasy, but it is the way school systems in most other industrialized countries function, which is a major reason their students consistently outperform ours on international assessments. It is also the vision behind the Goals 2000 law passed by Congress in 1994. Goals 2000 created a framework for each state to construct a reform strategy based on three principles: rigorous academic standards; the alignment of curriculum, assessments, textbooks, and teacher education; and clear incentives for students to work hard.

As a result of Goals 2000, standards-based reform is gaining momentum. All but a few states have chosen to participate in Goals 2000, and most have some sort of standards-setting effort under way or completed. And the public clearly supports the idea of school reform based on rigorous standards. In a recent poll by the Public Agenda Foundation, Americans ranked academic standards and student discipline as the two greatest problems facing the public schools.

Only a strong set of standards will provide the sturdy foundation we need to dramatically improve academic achievement and win back the confidence of the public.

But what exactly do people mean by "standards"? If the activities in the states are a fair indicator, it seems that everyone has a different idea of what standards should look like and what functions they are meant to serve. Some states are basing their standards in the academic subjects; others are not. Some states have short lists that fit entire subjects on one page; others have produced large volumes. Some states are focusing on the skills students should acquire; others are combining academic content and skills. Some states are mainly interested in establishing what students should learn; others are just as interested in changing the way teachers teach.

The list of differences goes on and on. And the confusion this is creating is threatening to shift the momentum and erode support for a very good idea. In our view, only a strong set of standards will provide the sturdy foundation we need to dramatically improve academic achievement and win back the confidence of the public. What's needed now, more than anything else, is some clarity and consensus around what such a set of standards would look like.

As our contribution to this discussion, the AFT has developed the following criteria for high-quality standards. We hope these will be used by people at the state and local level who are developing standards for their students. We also hope teachers, parents, and other interested citizens will use these criteria to judge whether the standards developed in their states and communities are good enough. At the very least, we hope our criteria will help bring clarity and focus to the many conversations taking place around the country. This idea is too important and too powerful to let slip away.

1. Standards must focus on academics.

This may seem obvious to many people, but it is the most important point we can make. The purpose of setting standards is to improve students' academic performance. This should be the central mission of all our educational arrangements. Forging agreement around the academic content of the curriculum and the expectations we have for our children is the essential first step. If we can agree on what all students deserve to learn, we can focus our energies and resources on giving all kids the opportunities they need to read and write better; reach greater heights in math and science; and learn more about history, geography, literature, and the arts. These are the things that will make a difference in students' lives, and they are what parents care most about.

But there are some who would rather have standards focus on social and behavioral issues than on academics. Across the country, we've watched debates and legislative battles unfold around proposed education standards or "outcomes" that stray from or avoid academics. These efforts, frequently referred to as "outcomes-based education," or "OBE," are being challenged and defeated, and not only by religious fundamentalists but also by concerned parents, business people, educators, and other public school supporters who have raised serious questions about some of the standards that have been developed.

In several states, the intense negative reaction to non-academic standards resulted in the substantial revision or defeat of the entire standards reform package. Here are a few examples from Virginia—where in 1992 Governor Douglas Wilder abandoned the complete draft set of "Common Core of Learning" standards; and from Pennsylvania—where strong opposition prompted the state to significantly amend its draft "Student Learning Outcomes":

The purpose of setting standards is to improve students' academic performance.

All students understand and appreciate their worth as unique and capable individuals and exhibit self-esteem. *(Pennsylvania's Student Learning Outcomes, Draft 1991)*

All students demonstrate caregiving skills and evaluate, in all settings, appropriate child care practices necessary to nurture children based on child development theory. *(Pennsylvania's Student Learning Outcomes, Draft 1991)*

[A] student who is becoming a fulfilled individual uses the fundamental skills of thinking, problem solving, communicating, quantifying, and collaborating...to analyze personal strengths and limitations to improve behaviors, capabilities, and plans. *(Virginia's Common Core of Learning, Draft 1992)*

In contrast, the following excerpt from proposed national history standards is clearly grounded in academic content and represents the type of information that standards ought to convey:

Students would be able to demonstrate understanding of the causes of the American Revolution by:

- Comparing the arguments advanced by defenders and opponents of the new imperial policy on the traditional rights of English people and the legitimacy of asking the colonies to pay a share of the costs of empire.
- Reconstructing the chronology of the critical events leading to the outbreak of armed conflict between the American colonies and England.
- Analyzing the connection between political ideas and economic interests and comparing the ideas and interests of different groups.
- Reconstructing the arguments among patriots and loyalists about independence and drawing conclusions about how the decision to declare independence was reached.

(This is followed by examples of how the standard can be taught at different grade levels.)

As noted above, the program most responsible for giving standards a bad name is called "outcomes-based education" or OBE. Although it makes sense to organize our education system around the results—or outcomes—we hope it will produce, OBE's treatment of academic knowledge as a low priority doesn't sit well with most teachers and parents. OBE proponents have served as key consultants to several state education departments, and in each case the so-called "reform" proposal that resulted was met with significant opposition, largely because of the non-academic and controversial nature of the standards. Now, in a number of states, those opposed to any kind of standards development are trying to pin the "OBE" label on whatever effort is under way in an attempt to taint it. In reaction, states have begun to avoid using terms like "outcomes" and "OBE" to describe what they're doing. Terminology, however, is not at the heart of the matter. In the end, it's the content of the standards that must be kept center stage.

One final note: Schools certainly have a role to play in helping students develop those traits essential to good behavior and strong character, such as compassion, honesty, self-discipline, and perseverance. And the standards-setting process can contribute to that mission by ensuring that all students have access to a solid academic curriculum, because moral education is a natural by-product of a good curriculum. As students weigh the dilemmas and compromises of history, and learn about its heroes and villains; as they re-visit the great debates that have stirred mankind over the centuries; and as they confront the ethical issues that lie at the heart of so much of our great literature, their moral understandings will be greatly enriched.

In addition, of course, schools can contribute to the moral education of the young in other ways—for example, through their discipline policies; through their decisions about what to award and recognize; and by the example they set as a community in which the virtues are both expected and honored. These are not matters, however, that lend themselves well to the standards-setting mechanism. They are best taken up by teachers, parents, and the local or school community, coming together to find common ground in their hopes for their children.

When standards-setters abandon the disciplines, content suffers.

2. Standards must be grounded in the core disciplines.

Some educators have thought it best to move away from traditional subject areas and create "interdisciplinary" expectations for students. "Human growth and development," "environmental stewardship," and "cultural and creative endeavors" are just some "subject areas" that have replaced math, science, history, and English. Proponents of this approach argue that solutions to "real world" problems and issues cannot be based on one or another discipline, so, therefore, neither should standards.

This argument belies the purpose of standards, which is to focus our educational systems on what is most essential for students to learn, not to prescribe how the material should be taught. At its best, interdisciplinary education can be an effective approach to teaching the knowledge and skills that arise from the disciplines. In the hands of imaginative and well-educated teachers, it can be useful and engaging. But its value depends on a firm grounding in the subjects themselves. Strong standards in each of the core disciplines will ensure that interdisciplinary approaches reflect the depth and integrity of the disciplines involved.

When standards-setters abandon the disciplines, content suffers. Standards become vaguely worded and loosely connected, making the job of curriculum designers, assessment developers, and teachers all but impossible.

3. Standards must be specific enough to assure the development of a common core curriculum.

We have already established that good standards are based in the academic disciplines, but being academic and subject based is not enough. A good set of standards should also outline the essential knowledge and skills that all students should learn in each subject area.

Such standards would guarantee that all students, regardless of background or neighborhood, are exposed to a common core of learning. This means putting an end to the unequal, uninspiring curricula that many disadvantaged kids get locked into from an early age. A strong common core also would enable us to continue to forge a strong common culture, to preserve what unites us without diminishing the unique strength that flows from our diversity.

Requiring a common core would not, of course, limit students who choose to go beyond it to advanced-level high school courses in any of the academic subjects. Nor would it prevent a fruitful integration of the academic core with vocational or technical education at the upper-secondary level. But to the extent that a common core was established through most of the high school years—which is the practice abroad—we would ensure that *all* students are given a more equal chance to become well-educated citizens.

In addition, teachers would have a much clearer idea of what their students learned the year before, so they would not have to waste so much class time re-teaching previously covered material. And it would make life much easier on students who move from one school to another and often find themselves either way ahead or way behind the rest of the class.

Unfortunately, many states' standards seem to be falling short in this regard, offering the barest guidance as to what should be covered.

If standards are to set forth the content of a common core, and if they are to be used by teachers, curriculum and assessment developers, textbook publishers, and others, they must be specific enough to guide these people in their activities. With a common core in hand, we could—as other industrialized countries have done—end the need for every teacher to have to re-invent the wheel. Like other professions, we could begin to accrue a more focused body of knowledge, a portfolio of good practice, of materials and options that teachers and teacher educators could draw from, adapt, add to, polish, and refine. But this is only possible if there is broad agreement on what is most essential to learn.

Unfortunately, many states' standards seem to be falling short in this regard, offering the barest guidance as to what should be covered. For example, New York state, in a draft of its social studies standards, mentions that students should learn about the concept of "war and its many repercussions," but never specifies which wars are most important for them to learn about. Such a guideline could lead to textbooks that cover the U.S. Revolution and the Civil War, assessments that cover World War I and World War II, and professional development and teacher education that stress World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. Some of the standards we've seen fit entire subjects on a single page. Others don't make any distinction between what elementary and secondary students should learn.

Though it has received a lot of attention for its many recent reform efforts, Kentucky is an example of a state whose standards are not specific enough to guide local districts toward a core curriculum and matching, content-based assessments. There are only five to 10 standards in each subject area, and many are

vague and vacuous. Here, for example, is the complete list of Kentucky's social studies standards:

2.14 Students understand the democratic principles of justice, equality, responsibility, and freedom and apply them to real-life situations.

2.15 Students can accurately describe various forms of government and analyze issues that relate to the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a democracy.

2.16 Students observe, analyze, and interpret human behaviors, social groupings, and institutions to better understand people and the relationships among individuals and among groups.

2.17 Students interact effectively and work cooperatively with the many ethnic and cultural groups of our nation and world.

2.18 Students understand economic principles and are able to make economic decisions that have consequences in daily living.

2.19 Students recognize and understand the relationship between people and geography and apply their knowledge in real-life situations.

2.20 Students understand, analyze, and interpret historical events, conditions, trends and issues to develop historical perspective.

Neither standards nor the resulting common core curriculum should try to cover everything to be taught.

In contrast, California provides its standards in terms of grade-by-grade curriculum frameworks, thus providing substantial, common, clear guidance to all the players in the educational system. Here, for example, is an excerpt from the California History/Social Science Framework describing what 11th graders should understand about the Great Depression:

Students should assess the likely causes of the Depression and examine its effects on ordinary people in different parts of the nation through use of historical materials. They should recognize the way in which natural drought combined with unwise agricultural practices to cause the Dust Bowl, a major factor in the economic and cultural chaos of the 1930s. They should see the linkage between severe economic distress and social turmoil. Photographs, films, newspaper accounts, interviews with persons who lived in the period, as well as paintings and novels (such as John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*) will help students understand this critical era.

The administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal should be studied as an example of the government's response to economic crisis. The efforts of the Roosevelt Administration to alleviate the crisis through the creation of social welfare programs, regulatory agencies, and economic planning bureaus should be carefully assessed.

How specific should standards be? There is no perfect formula. But it helps to keep in mind why we are setting standards in the first place and how they will be used. Here are some questions worth asking about the standards in your state: Are the standards organized by grade levels or age bands, or do they in some way clearly delineate the differences in expectations for students at different levels? If not, how could one use them to develop curricula or instructional materials for students of different ages or levels? Are the standards clear and specific enough to guide the development of curriculum frameworks that would describe the core units to be covered in every grade? If a state were to adopt these standards but give districts the responsibility for fleshing them out into a curriculum, what are the chances that students across the state would be learning the same core curriculum? If a student moved from one district to another or from school to school within a district, would these standards ease the move to a new grade in a new school without putting him or her too far ahead or behind the other students? If a textbook publisher and an assessment developer were to use the standards in their work, is it likely that the text and the test would be well aligned?

4. Standards must be manageable given the constraints of time.

Neither standards nor the resulting common core curriculum should try to cover everything to be taught. A core curriculum should probably constitute somewhere between 60 percent to 80 percent of the academic curriculum; the exact amount is open for discussion. The rest can be filled in by local districts, schools, and teachers.

It's important not to draw the wrong conclusion here: There is nothing sacred about the ways schools presently apportion their time. According to *Prisoners of Time*, the 1994 report by the National Education Commission on Time and Learning, American schools spend about half as much time on academics as their counterparts overseas. The average U.S. high school graduate spends only 40 percent of his or her time studying core academic subjects in his school career. There is no reason why these figures should be so low, and standards are the first necessary step toward initiating some changes in school schedules.

Nothing will be accomplished by setting standards that are too low.

Nevertheless, as states begin to adopt standards, there undoubtedly will be competing demands for time in the curriculum—both within and among the disciplines. Standards-setters will need to exhibit restraint in the face of these pressures. Their job is to determine what is *essential* for students to learn. A laundry list that satisfies everyone will be self-defeating, leaving teachers right back where they are now—facing the impossible task of trying to rush through overstuffed textbooks and ridiculously long sets of curriculum objectives.

5. Standards must be rigorous and world class.

When President Clinton signed Goals 2000 into law, he was flanked by huge signs bearing the phrase "world-class standards." The national education goals call for American students to be first in the world in math and science by the turn of the century. And states and professional associations that are setting standards often repeat the mantra "world class," "rigorous," and "challenging" to describe what they are doing.

But what do these words really mean? When some people talk too easily about world-class standards, they seem to forget there *is* a real world out there. If standards truly are rigorous and world class, they should stand up to some tough but sensible questions. Do they reflect various levels of knowledge and skills comparable to what students in high-achieving countries are expected to master? Which countries did the standards-setters use as a basis for comparison, and what documents did they look at to determine their standards? Will the standards lead to a core curriculum for all students—those headed for college and those headed for work—as demanding as in France or Japan? Are the standards as rigorous as those reflected in the French *Brevet du College* and the German *Realschule* exams, a standard met by two-thirds of students in those countries? Will they result in assessments for the college-bound as rigorous as the German *Abitur*, the French *baccalauréat* exams, the British A-levels, or the Japanese university entrance exams? Did the standards-setters refer to internationally benchmarked curricula and exams such as those of the International Baccalaureate program? What about the best programs and resources available in the U.S., such as the College Board's Advanced Placement exams and Achievement tests,

or the curriculum frameworks used in California?

Everyone involved in developing standards, whether at the national, state, or local level, must take these questions seriously. Information on other countries is not easy to get ahold of, but then nobody ever said setting standards would be easy. One thing is certain, though. Nothing will be accomplished by setting standards that are too low. And without honest international benchmarking, we will be captives of our own parochial notions of what students can accomplish, and low standards will be the result.

6. Standards must include 'performance standards.'

When polled earlier this year, most AFT teachers agreed that students across the board are capable of doing better work and mastering more demanding material than they currently are doing. Teachers also cited the lack of student motivation as one of the biggest problems they face in their classrooms. In any profession, specific standards are developed in order to motivate and measure performance. Whether you look at the medical boards that prospective doctors must pass, the bar exams for lawyers, or the time trials for drivers to qualify for the Indianapolis 500—performance is never dealt with in the abstract. For example, Indy racers are not simply told that "very fast driving" will qualify them for the big race. They know exactly what times they need to beat, and they plan their strategies accordingly.

It should be the same for education standards. An influential report recently commissioned by the National Education Goals Panel, *Promises To Keep: Creating High Standards for American Students*, asserted that a complete set of standards should describe both what students should know and be able to do *and* how well they must know and do it. The report separated these functions into two distinct categories—content standards and performance standards. *Content standards* should define the knowledge (the most important and enduring ideas, concepts, issues, dilemmas, and information) and skills (the ways of thinking, working, communicating, reasoning, and investigating) essential to each discipline. *Performance standards* should specify "how good is good enough." They should indicate how competent a student demonstration must be to indicate attainment of the content standards.

A complete set of standards should describe both what students should know and be able to do and how well they must know and do it.

It is safe to say that none of the standards documents we've seen—whether from the national standards groups, states, or other professional associations—fully incorporates performance standards as defined in the Goals Panel report. States will find this a particular problem when they try to develop assessments, because performance standards are essential to gauging whether the content standards are met.

A few states may be on the right track. Colorado, for example, has created a good set of content standards, better than most of the other state standards we've seen so far. And its next step will be to develop "performance levels" and assessments for each content standard. So, not only will Colorado have a history standard that requires fourth graders to "understand the difference between a democracy and an autocracy," but the state will follow that with a performance standard that establishes how *well* students must understand that difference and how they can demonstrate that understanding. This will probably require showing examples of student work that meets the various performance levels Colorado sets, or possibly creating sample assessment questions or exercises and the rubrics that would be used to grade them. It will be interesting to watch this work develop.

7. Standards must include multiple performance levels.

When we speak of our students all being held to world-class standards, does that mean we should expect them all to achieve at the levels reached by the top students in other countries? Of course not. France and Germany have *high* standards for all their students, but they don't expect all to meet the *same* standard. Nor do all Japanese students go to Tokyo University. Some standards are for those who plan to attend universities; others are for those whose intentions are technical or vocational. It's just not realistic to expect the same from everyone. Some students are able to master more challenging material than others.

There is nothing wrong with admitting this, and students know it very well. We need multiple standards that set expectations to match different aspirations and achievements. A single standard would either have to be set low enough for most to pass, which does nothing to raise student achievement, or too high for many to reach, which only turns students off to the idea of hard work. The trick is to set standards that are within reach but still require dedication and hard work—to stretch all kids to their maximum potential.

We can establish challenging standards without sacrificing rigor, by developing multiple performance standards, or multiple levels of achievement for each content standard. For example, students could work to reach "proficient," "advanced," or "expert" levels in a given standard, proficient being the minimum. This is how the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reports its findings, and it is also how California's Golden State Exams are scored.

Another approach could be to require all students to meet a common standard before they can graduate from high school, but also to create higher standards for students to pursue if they attain that initial level earlier in their high school years or wish to qualify for more selective higher education. This is similar to the way the education systems in some foreign countries operate.

However we decide to organize our multiple standards, it is vital that all the standards are high and all students are exposed to a common core of academic knowledge and skills. Multiple standards can't mean high standards for some and empty standards for others; it should be a way to set both a "high floor" for student achievement and a "high ceiling."

A single standard would either have to be set low enough for most to pass, which does nothing to raise student achievement, or too high for many to reach, which only turns students off to the idea of hard work.

8. Standards must combine knowledge and skills, not pursue one at the expense of the other.

There is a terrible myth in education that has a tendency to confuse important decisions affecting curriculum and that is threatening to strangle the standards movement. The theory goes something like this: Knowledge is dynamic, transient, always changing, whereas the need to apply knowledge is constant. What is most important for students to learn are skills such as problem-solving, decision-making, and higher-order thinking, so that they can react to any situation, gain and use whatever knowledge they need, and not waste their time learning facts and theories that may turn out to be irrelevant to their lives. Who can be sure of how much specific knowledge each person will really need in the "real world" anyway?

Of course this is overstated, but not by much. At the root of this myth is a false dichotomy between knowledge and skills. And what it is leading to are standards that neglect the subject matter (the facts, ideas, concepts, issues, and informa-

tion) of the traditional academic disciplines that is needed to develop the skills in the first place. Consider the following very general "skills" standards:

...A student will demonstrate the ability to think critically, creatively and reflectively in making decisions and solving problems. *(Oregon's Certificate of Initial Mastery, 1991)*

While performing individual and group tasks, students organize and intellectually process symbols, pictures, objects and information in a way which permits the mind to generate the reality of what is being represented. *(Florida's Blueprint 2000, 1992)*

[Students should] have skills that enhance their personal well-being [including] decision-making ability, interpersonal skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills... *(Maine's Common Core of Learning, 1990)*

Students [should] make sense of the various messages to which they listen. *(Kentucky's Learning Outcomes, 1994)*

These examples may seem harmless enough, but they leave unanswered just what students are to solve, decide, or think about. What is the subject? Where is reality? The unyielding facts and ideas? And how are students to learn how to learn without learning something concrete first? Let's turn the issue around: Is it possible to name a problem to be solved, a decision to be made, or a thing to be thought about that is not tied to subject matter?

And what kind of guidance do skills examples such as the ones cited above give to teachers and others in education? "Critical thinking" cannot be taught in the abstract. However, it *can* be developed, for example, by having students analyze the contradiction between the principle expressed in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal" and the existence of slavery at the time. But a skill that is cut free from content and context is meaningless—and impossible to teach or assess.

Good standards will ensure that students develop the intellectual powers of observation, communication, reasoning, reflection, judgment, perspective, and synthesis that are often lumped under vague phrases like "higher order" or "critical thinking." But they must pursue these skills through the content of the subject areas.

An overemphasis on generic skills and processes seems to be a particular trend in states that allow local control of the *entire* curriculum. In essence, this is a way for states to avoid making judgments about the core content of the curriculum. But as discussed earlier, vague, content-free standards accomplish nothing. They do not ensure that all kids are given a challenging curriculum, nor can they lead to assessments that reveal the depth and breadth of student knowledge.

Vague, content-free standards accomplish nothing. They do not ensure that all kids are given a challenging curriculum, nor can they lead to assessments that reveal the depth and breadth of student knowledge.

9. Standards must not dictate how the material should be taught.

Good standards are designed to guide, not to limit, instruction. They are intended to communicate to teachers and other school staff what is most important for students to learn, but not how the ideas or information should be taught. If, for example, a set of standards includes teaching activities, they should be there for illustrative purposes only. It is important that standards not be allowed to infringe on teachers' professional responsibilities, their ability to choose their particular methods and to design their lessons and courses in ways that reflect the best available current research and that are best suited to their students' needs and to their own strengths and teaching styles.

For a more practical look at how standards can provide guidance for curriculum developers and classroom teachers, while giving teachers broad latitude to choose their materials and design their lessons, see

Paul Gagnon's award-winning article "And Bringing Them to the Classroom" in the Fall 1994 issue of American Educator, *the professional journal of the American Federation of Teachers.*

10. Standards must be written clearly enough for all stakeholders to understand.

Part of the challenge states will face with Goals 2000 and standards is how to generate broad public support. It is important, therefore, that standards not be written solely for an education audience. The standards must be written clearly enough for parents, students, and interested community members to understand—indeed, to be inspired by. Otherwise, they will risk alienating the very people whose trust and support they need.

We've already pointed out a number of ways that standards can go astray and cause friction. Non-academic or interdisciplinary standards aren't clear to the public and often engender distrust. Vague standards do not communicate anything and usually raise more questions than they answer. Standards that emphasize skills at the expense of content knowledge are treated with deserved skepticism by parents. The list goes on. Sometimes, something as simple as a word or phrase that has no meaning to parents can cause a problem.

Our best advice to writers of standards is to consider what the language of each standard will mean to everyone who will be reading them, and avoid jargon. Are the standards clear enough for teachers to understand what is required of them and their students? For parents to understand what is expected of their children and to keep an eye on their progress? Do the standards send a coherent message to employers and colleges as to what students will know and be able to do when they leave high school? What about the students themselves? Will they be able to read the standards and get a clear idea of what is expected of them?

If the answer to any of these questions is "no," your work is not done. If a standard seems confusing to lay people, it needs to be re-thought and re-written. Examples of what to avoid:

> All students understand human development theories across the lifespan and value individual uniqueness in the context of family life. *(Pennsylvania's Student Learning Outcomes, Draft 1991)*

> [A high school graduate] understands and describes ways that a specified culture shapes patterns of interaction of individuals and groups. *(Minnesota's High School Standards, Draft 1994)*

> A student who is becoming a self-directed learner uses...information, organizations, and persons as learning resources. *(Virginia's Common Core of Learning, Draft 1992)*

The AFT and others believe that if we develop rigorous and useable standards, we have a real opportunity to turn things around in our schools. Such an effort is certainly a more palatable and responsible strategy than turning the schools over to the whim of the market.

The threshold of a great opportunity

Subject matter standards and a common core to the curriculum are new concepts in American education, and people—including many educators—are automatically skeptical of new ideas in the field. Considering the fads and failures of the past, this skepticism is certainly healthy. But the AFT and others believe that if we develop rigorous and useable standards and shape intelligent Goals 2000 plans, we have a real opportunity to turn things around in our schools. Such an effort is certainly a more palatable and responsible strategy than turning the schools over to the whim of the market.

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For more information or to comment on these criteria, contact Matt Gandal in the AFT Educational Issues Department, 555 New Jersey Ave., N.W., Washington, DC 20001.

Using the AFT Criteria

- Adopt these (or similar) criteria as the first step in your standards-setting efforts. By accepting these criteria up-front, state and local Goals 2000 panels or other standards-setting bodies will be giving clear guidance to the people who will actually develop the standards in each subject. Also, because the criteria clearly describe what the standards should look like and what their purpose is, they can help head off the misconceptions and rumors that often accompany standards development efforts.
- Use them to review state or local standards. Teams of teachers and other school staff can review state or local standards using the AFT criteria. The results of these reviews can be presented to Goals 2000 panels, school boards, state or local education agencies, or at hearings held on standards.
- Use them to launch discussions about proposed standards. Individual schools may want to use the AFT criteria to launch faculty discussions about the quality of local district standards. Parent and business groups may want to use them as the basis for discussing the proposed standards.
- Use them to analyze your district's academic requirements. Teachers and others can use the AFT criteria as a helpful tool in analyzing their district or school's academic requirements. Are there explicit standards in your district or school? If not, use the criteria as a lever to push for clear standards. If there are standards, use the criteria to help determine whether they're strong enough.
- Use them in workshops. The criteria can be used in workshops as a way of introducing teachers and others who are interested to the concept of standards-based reform. Allowing people to compare a few different sets of standards using the criteria helps make standards less abstract and makes it clear why weak standards won't be able to drive the reforms that are necessary. *(Contact the AFT Educational Issues Department for workshop outlines.)*

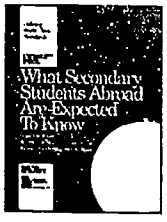
'Must Reads' on Standards

As part of its effort to show what world class standards really look like, the AFT has pulled together documents from high-achieving countries abroad—and excellent materials from this country—and packaged them in two series that anyone involved in developing and reviewing standards and curriculum will want to read. In addition to the actual documents—including assessments, curriculum frameworks, scoring guides, and sample answers—these publications provide an overview of other countries' educational systems and how they are built around high standards and expectations for the vast majority of students.

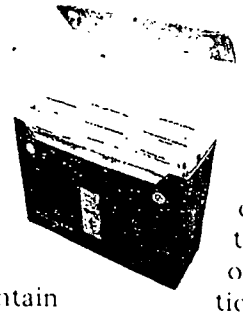
Defining World Class Standards

Vol. 1. What College-Bound Students Abroad Are Expected To Know About Biology—This book makes available for the first time actual biology exams taken by college-bound students in England and Wales, France, Germany, and Japan. It also includes scoring guides, sample answers, and a brief discussion of each country's education system, as well as the U.S. Advanced Placement biology exam. 120 pages.

Vol. 2. What Secondary Students Abroad Are Expected To Know: Gateway Exams Taken by Average-Achieving Students in France, Germany, and Scotland—This book contains gateway exams taken by average-achieving students at the end of 9th and 10th grade in France (French, Math, and History/Geography); Germany (German, English, and Math); and Scotland (English, Math, and Biology). It also includes a brief discussion of each country's school-to-work transition system and, for comparative purposes, the General Education Development practice test (GED) from the United States. 176 pages.



Setting World Class Standards



These boxed kits contain large collections of resources designed to help anyone involved in setting or reviewing standards, or developing curriculum, in six core academic subjects. The standards kits show what other high-achieving countries expect their students to know and be able to do and provide examples from this country of rigorous and exemplary standards, curriculum, and assessments. The kits include translated exams from abroad, materials from the Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs, grade-level guides from the Core Knowledge Foundation, examples of state and local standards, and materials from other organizations involved in setting standards.

Setting World Class Standards in English/Language Arts

Setting World Class Standards in History, Civics, and Geography

Setting World Class Standards in Mathematics

Setting World Class Standards in Science

Main kit (focuses on K-12 science and includes exams, course guides, and scoring guidelines in high school biology).

Supplemental kit (contains high school exams, course guides, and scoring guidelines in physics and chemistry).

Please send me:

_____ copies of *What College-Bound Students Abroad Are Expected To Know About Biology*, $10 per book; orders of 5 or more: $8 each (Item No. 250).

_____ copies of *What Secondary Students Abroad Are Expected To Know*; $15 each; orders of 5 or more, $12 each (Item No. 251)

Setting World Class Standards in English/Language Arts

_____ copies, $40 each

Setting World Class Standards in History, Geography, and Civics

_____ copies, $65 each

Setting World Class Standards in Mathematics

_____ copies, $50 each

Setting World Class Standards in Science

_____ copies of main kit, $65 each

_____ copies of supplemental kit, $20 each. (Price for both kits, $75)

Please note: *Prices for these kits are based on discounted materials provided by publishers and cannot be guaranteed beyond 1995*

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